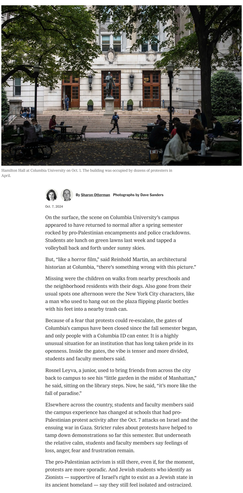
Campuses Are Calmer, but They Are Not Normal, Students and Faculty Say

A year of war in Gaza has left college students and faculty feeling shaken and angry, with the world and with each other.

Listen to this article · 10:14 min Learn more
Share full article



Hamilton Hall at Columbia University on Oct. 7. The building was occupied by dozens of protesters in April.

By Sharon Otterman Photographs by Dave Sanders

Oct. 7, 2024

On the surface, the scene on Columbia University's campus appeared to have returned to normal after a spring semester rocked by pro-Palestinian encampments and police crackdowns. Students ate lunch on green lawns last week and sapped a volleyball back and forth under sunny skies.

But, "like a horror film," said Reinhold Martin, an architectural historian at Columbia, "there's something wrong with this picture."

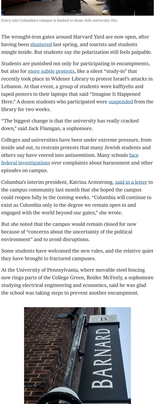
Missing were the children on walks from nearby preschools and the neighborhood residents with their dogs. Also gone from their usual spots one afternoon were the New York City characters, like a man who used to hang out on the plaza flipping plastic bottles with his feet into a nearby trash can.

Because of a fear that protests could re-escalate, the gates of Columbia's campus have been closed since the fall semester began, and only people with a Columbia ID can enter. It is a highly unusual situation for an institution that has long taken pride in its openness. Inside the gates, the vibe is tense and more divided, students and faculty members said.

Russell Leyva, a junior, used to bring friends from across the city back to campus to see his "little garden in the midst of Manhattan," he said, sitting on the library steps. Now, he said, "it's more like the fall of paradise."

Elsewhere across the country, students and faculty members said the campus experience has changed at schools that host pro-Palestinian protest activity after the Oct. 7 attacks on Israel and the ensuing war in Gaza. Stricter rules about protests have helped to tamp down demonstrations so far this semester. But underneath the relative calm, students and faculty members say feelings of loss, anger, fear and frustration remain.

The pro-Palestinian activism is still there, even if, for the moment, protests are more sporadic. And Jewish students who identify as Zionists — supportive of Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state in its ancient homeland — say they still feel isolated and ostracized.



A locked gate at Columbia University this week.

While the stricter rules are meant to ensure that Jewish students feel safer from rising antisemitism on campus, free speech advocates believe the impulse by university administrators around the country to deter protests through discipline and more restrictive rules will not be effective in the long run.

"There's been a massive clamp down on faculty speech, staff speech and student speech," said Todd Wolfson, the national president of the American Association of University Professors, which supports academic freedom. "And it's not. It undermines the core values of higher education around critical thinking and being the bedrock of democracy."

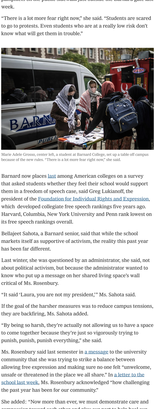
At the University of California, Los Angeles, administrators created new rules for demonstrations, banning encampments and making it possible to hold groups liable for the security costs of their demonstrations, which some students say have chilled protests. There is also an increased presence of armed police on campus.

The measures aim to prevent a repeat of the violence of earlier this year, when a pro-Palestinian encampment that had been accused of discriminating against Jewish students was attacked by pro-Israel counterprotesters, leading to a melee that campus security officers failed to stop for hours. But some students say the measures have not restored a sense of peace to campus.

"It's a very tense atmosphere that is feigned to look normal as if it was like pre-Oct. 7," said Layth Hundoosh, a junior studying psychology and creative writing. "I would say the general student vibe is like, this lack of hope. There are just kind of feelings of, like, sadness."

At Northwestern University, Holly Simmons, a junior, said the atmosphere felt calmer, but that protest activity seemed to have migrated online because of the stricter protest policies.

"It's still vocal online but in person it's definitely not," she said.



Entry into Columbia's campus is limited to those with university IDs.

The wrought-iron gates around Harvard Yard are now open, after having been shuttered last spring, and tourists and students mingle inside. But students say the polarization still feels palpable.

Students are punished not only for participating in encampments, but also for many rabble protests, like a silent "study-in" that recently took place in Widener Library to protest Israel's attacks in Lebanon. At that event, a group of students wore ballyhoo and taped posters to their laptops that said "Imagine It Happened Here." A dozen students who participated were suspended from the library for two weeks.

"The biggest change is that the university has really cracked down," said Jack Flanigan, a sophomore.

Colleges and universities have been under extreme pressure, from inside and out, to restrain protests that many Jewish students and others say have veered into antisemitism. Many schools face federal investigations over complaints about harassment and other episodes on campus.

Columbia's interim president, Katrina Armstrong, said in a letter to the campus community last month that she hoped the campus could reopen fully in the coming weeks. "Columbia will continue to exist as Columbia only to the degree we remain open to and engaged with the world beyond our gates," she wrote.

But she noted that the campus would remain closed for now because of "concerns about the uncertainty of the political environment" and to avoid disruptions.

Some students have welcomed the new rules, and the relative quiet they have brought to fractured campuses.

At the University of Pennsylvania, where movable steel fencing now rings parts of the College Green, Reider McFeely, a sophomore studying electrical engineering and economics, said he was glad the school was taking steps to prevent another encampment.

A security camera at Barnard College.

"The setting up of tents in a semi-permanent structure is not what this space is intended to be used for," he said. "I'm 100 percent in support of protests that follow guidelines but I think the encampment probably crossed a line."

And at Harvard, Jacob Miller, a senior who last year led his campus chapter of Hillel, the Jewish campus organization, said administrators should have more aggressively enforced protest restrictions against the encampment there last spring.

"Rules obviously lose their meaning if they're not enforced," he said.

Perhaps nowhere are the changes since last Oct. 7 being felt more strongly than at Columbia and an affiliated college, Barnard, because they became the epicenter of the nation's student encampment movement last year.

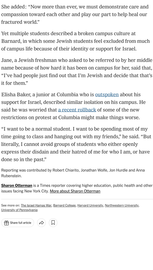
The most obvious difference is the closure of campus gates at both schools, meaning students must swipe in to enter. Barnard has also enforced a ban on all dorm door decorations, to prevent students from posting pro-Palestinian messages that some students complained were threatening and offensive. To identify students present at protests for discipline, Barnard and Columbia have used data from student ID swipes, making some students feel surveilled. Dozens of students have faced disciplinary meetings.

Barnard has made so many moves to contain free expression under its new president, Laura Ann Rosenbury, that campus is now "unrecognizable," said Nura Mlaouch, a history professor.

"I think it's quite astonishing, really, to see how quickly a community can unravel," she said. "I think we're a cautionary tale."

Because of new rules restricting political activity on campus, Marie Adele Grosso, a Barnard junior, set up a table with pro-Palestinian pamphlets on the public sidewalk just outside the Barnard gate last week.

"There is a lot more fear right now," she said. "Students are scared to go to protests. Even students who are at a really low risk don't know what will get them in trouble."



Marie Adele Grosso, center left, a student at Barnard College, set up a table off campus because of the new rules. "There is a lot more fear right now," she said.

Barnard now places last among American colleges on a survey that asked students whether they feel their school would support them in a freedom of speech case, said Greg Lukianoff, the president of the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, which developed collegiate free speech rankings five years ago. Harvard, Columbia, New York University and Penn rank lowest on its free speech rankings overall.

Bellajeet Sahota, a Barnard senior, said that while the school markets itself as supportive of activism, the reality this past year has been far different.

Last winter, she was questioned by an administrator, she said, not about political activism, but because the administrator wanted to know who put up a message on her shared living space's wall critical of Ms. Rosenbury.

"It said 'Laura, you are not my president,'" Ms. Sahota said.

If the goal of the harsher measures was to reduce campus tensions, they are backfiring, Ms. Sahota added.

"By being so harsh, they're actually not allowing us to have a space to come together because they're just so vigorously trying to punish, punish, punish everything," she said.

Ms. Rosenbury said last semester in a message to the university community that she was trying to strike a balance between allowing free expression and making sure no one felt "unwelcome, unsafe or threatened in the place we all share." In a letter to the school last week, Ms. Rosenbury acknowledged "how challenging the past year has been for our community."

She added: "Now more than ever, we must demonstrate care and compassion toward each other and play our part to help heal our fractured world."

Yet multiple students described a broken campus culture at Barnard, in which some Jewish students feel excluded from much of campus life because of their identity or support for Israel.

Jane, a Jewish freshman who asked to be referred to by her middle name because of how hard it has been on campus for her, said that, "I've had people just find out that I'm Jewish and decide that that's it for them."

Elisha Baker, a junior at Columbia who is outspoken about his support for Israel, described similar isolation on his campus. He said he was worried that a recent rollback of some of the new restrictions on protest at Columbia might make things worse.

"I want to be a normal student. I want to be spending most of my time going to class and hanging out with my friends," he said. "But literally, I cannot avoid groups of students with either openly express their disdain and their hatred of me who I am, or have done so in the past."

Reporting was contributed by Robert Chiarito, Jonathan Wolfe, Jon Hurdle and Anna Rubenstein.

Sharon Otterman is a Times reporter covering higher education, public health and other issues facing New York City. More about Sharon Otterman

See more on: The Israel-Hamas War, Barnard College, Harvard University, Northwestern University, University of Pennsylvania

Share full article